

Says FEMA Must Act as a Partner Instead of an Obstacle in Louisiana's Recovery
February 25, 2009

WASHINGTON, D.C. - During a Congressional hearing today, U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon (LA-03) submitted testimony urging the new Administration to apply greater pressure on FEMA to act as a partner, instead of an obstacle, in Louisiana's ongoing hurricane recovery efforts. The hearing, titled "Post-Katrina Disaster Response and Recovery: Evaluating FEMA's Continuing Efforts in the Gulf Coast and Response to Recent Disasters," studied the status of the recovery from Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast as well as recovery efforts involving more recent disasters in Texas and Kentucky. It focused on overall disaster recovery programs being provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), concentrating on housing policy and problems and solutions regarding rebuilding public infrastructure.

In his testimony, Rep. Melancon wrote, **"As you are well aware, the Gulf Coast - specifically Louisiana - continues to face significant hurdles in moving forward quickly in fully rebuilding. While, I believe FEMA has assisted in the recovery, the agency has also been an obstacle on our long road home. Often it seems as though FEMA is more concerned about following a process than making progress."**

Rep. Melancon continued, **"Louisiana's state and local officials are tired of fighting with FEMA. They cannot move their communities forward unless FEMA works as a partner in this recovery. I hope that the new Homeland Security Secretary and FEMA Administrator will give the Gulf Coast Transitional Recovery Office in New Orleans and the Public Assistance office in Washington, D.C., a new directive to cease their obstinacy and to truly become partners in an efficient and successful recovery."**

The hearing was held by the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee's Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. While Rep. Melancon is not a member of the committee, he has been closely involved with their efforts to reform FEMA and hold the agency accountable for their performance in the Gulf Coast since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Last October, Rep. Melancon assisted Transportation and Infrastructure Committee staff when they traveled to Louisiana on a fact-finding trip to prepare for today's hearing.

In 2007, he sponsored legislation that originated in the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to cut some of the bureaucratic red tape that was still hindering the Gulf Coast's recovery from the 2005 hurricanes. The Hurricanes Katrina and Rita Recovery Facilitation Act of 2007 (H.R. 3247), which passed the House with overwhelming bipartisan support, would authorize changes to the public assistance programs administered by FEMA under the Stafford Act to provide relief for problems specific to Katrina and Rita recovery efforts. Rep. Melancon worked closely with other members of the Louisiana delegation and the bill's authors to ensure that the legislation would fix many of the short-term problems identified by local officials in south

Louisiana.

More information about today's hearing can be found on the committee's website [here](#).

Rep. Melancon's full testimony, as submitted for the record, is as follows:

I would first like to acknowledge the leadership and generosity shown by both Chairman Oberstar and Chairwoman Holmes Norton in addressing the many needs of the Gulf Coast in this trying time. Without them, the struggles we still face would, undoubtedly, be much greater. Thank you and your staffs for the time you have devoted to our rebuilding efforts.

Although Hurricanes Katrina and Rita made landfall almost three and half years ago, the Gulf Coast is still rebuilding. Congress must not forget the catastrophic damage left in the wake of these two devastating storms, and hearings like this one serve as a necessary reminder that the Gulf Coast still faces in this massive rebuilding effort. I thank the committee for holding this hearing.

As you are well aware, the Gulf Coast - specifically Louisiana - continues to face significant hurdles in moving forward quickly in fully rebuilding. While, I believe FEMA has assisted in the recovery, the agency has also been an obstacle on our long road home. Often it seems as though FEMA is more concerned about following a process than making progress.

FEMA has repeatedly and publically attributed Louisiana's rebuilding delays to state and local officials. Earlier this month, USA Today published an article, which quoted Jim Stark as saying "most of the delays are caused by local governments trying to wring more money out of the federal government, sometimes ignoring legal limits on what disaster aid can pay for." Scott Cowen, President of Tulane University in New Orleans and who has been a leader in New Orleans recovery efforts, responded to these remarks in an editorial also published by USA Today, "The statements by James Stark...are an insult to a region that continues to recover and rebuild despite, and not because of, FEMA."

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that FEMA, Mr. Stark in particular, has used the press to attempt to blame local officials as the main obstacle to the state's recovery. However, the state and even the former federal coordinator for Gulf Coast Rebuilding, General Doug O'Dell, have repeatedly convened meetings with FEMA to work out differences in private, but these meetings have failed to make any significant impact, largely because FEMA refuses to admit that they may be wrong.

As you can imagine, Louisiana's state and local officials are tired of fighting with FEMA. They cannot move their communities forward unless FEMA works as a partner in this recovery. I hope that the new Homeland Security Secretary and FEMA Administrator will give the Gulf Coast Transitional Recovery Office in New Orleans and the Public Assistance office in Washington, D.C., a new directive to cease their obstinacy and to truly become partners in an efficient and successful recovery.

I thank the committee again for holding this hearing. I look forward to working with all of my

colleagues in the Committee and the full House of Representatives - both Democrats and Republicans - to further address the rebuilding needs in the Gulf Coast.

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